

Moreover, it is sufficient to consider the ravages caused in souls by religious ignorance to be convinced of the urgent necessity there is for all to know God. Men do not sin only because they are wicked or because they have ill-disciplined passions. Ignorance is a deeper cause of their wrong-doings. It is for us to integrate the knowledge of God into the programme of our Christian life. The sanctity of St Thomas is the proof that this method, among all those recommended to us, is not the least efficacious in the matter of our sanctification.



## LIVING WISDOM

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**I**N attempting to teach religion to sixth-formers in a live fashion one becomes aware of a temptation to go to extremes. We may be so much aware of the needs the boy will experience within a few years of leaving school and the tests to which his faith will be put that we bow to necessity and equip him with a set of slick answers to all the questions with very little understanding of the underlying theological principles; we teach him apologetics rather than theology. On the other hand we may be so aware of the limitations of the ready-made answer that we embark on a long-term policy of teaching theology which of its nature can never be finished in a school life and which, much more disastrous, might easily be confined to a speculative study of principles with little linking up with personal and contemporary problems. In recent years the need for steering a middle course between these extremes has become obvious. Every educated Catholic needs to have at his fingertips ready and complete answers to questions on Marxism, euthanasia, birth control, abortion, and so on; he must know what the Church teaches and the reason for it. He must have his answers and his principles. These problems can be met and in fact are being met by many schools which give their senior boys a firm grounding in the principles of systematic theology with clear applications to matters already within the boys' own experience. During the

last ten years at least it has become clear to many teachers that the area of the boy's own interests has been greatly enlarged. There was a time when it was enough to point all moral principles with an example from school life itself: the need for truthfulness in justice to one's school fellows and so on. But now, while they find it as difficult as ever to practise truthfulness, honesty, chastity and so on, and have the personal moral problems we all have and had, in addition they are often seriously vexed by public moral problems. Perhaps a boy has a brother who is a doctor and who has told him some of the moral problems he has to face when he is asked, for instance, to perform an abortion. If that boy himself wishes to become a doctor this is a very real problem for him before he has left school. Again, one finds the boy whose family has suffered extreme hardship; he may be a refugee, or his father may have been maimed in the war. By the time he comes to the sixth form and is trying to think squarely about problems of social justice and racial relationships he discovers a hidden wound in himself which makes it very difficult for him to think dispassionately about these matters. In all these cases—and they are real ones—the boys are already living in a world beyond school. So it would be foolish to imagine we can teach religion effectively with applications to personal morality alone. This way we should produce morons. On the other hand we must not allow him to leave school with the notion that he has solved all the public and social problems. In either case he will have lost touch with reality.

University tutors sometimes tell us that they find Catholic boys unready to take a decision about their future; they seem not so much uncertain about what profession to enter as unwilling to take a plunge, and this is sometimes justified as waiting for the will of God to be manifest. Yet it is a fact of experience that once a boy takes up a job whole-heartedly, whether it turns out to be his life's work or not, the plunge does somehow clear his head and he soon discovers in what direction his true bent leads. At the same time these young men may give a display of confidence about a theology that never quite meets the real problems in their own or other people's lives. This, we are told, is one of the main causes of lapses from the practice of their religion; the study of religion at school has been too neat and cut-and-dried. Religious practice ends with their school life not only because the discipline of religion is identified with the discipline of school, but because

the truths of religion have been assimilated at school level in such a fashion that they are not vital enough to be applied to adult life. The young man's secular education continues after school but his religious thinking stays where it was when he left. Somehow we must give him religious truth in such a way that the basic principles remain firm and his confidence in them is unimpaired, but at the same time because they are living truths and because he has been trained to think hard they are applicable to the more complex problems of adult life. How is this to be done?

One thing is particularly important in a boarding school: a boy needs to have some opportunity of meeting grown-up problems in three dimensions, so to speak, while he still has the backing and support of schoolmasters who can supplement his limited experience. For this end a conference of the Society of St Vincent de Paul is invaluable. Most junior conferences have little opportunity of doing more than help with church work, choir books, sacristy, or at the best visit hospitals. This is not valueless, of course, and certainly visiting hospitals can give a boy a real insight into the problem of pain. If he has the opportunity of visiting over a long enough period he can see for himself how a man's character grows richer and warmer and sweeter through suffering willingly accepted. But in a few places it is possible for a junior conference to find even more rewarding work. In a district where there are scattered Catholics cut off from any organized Catholic life and with very little or no contact with the priest, boys from a junior conference, so long as they are carefully guided, can act as a link between priest and people, and in doing so they learn a great deal. Almost the first thing they discover is that they are asking more than the Church asks. Perhaps they will want to drive people to Mass when they are not obliged to go, perhaps they want to rush a lapsed Catholic back into the Church without enough preparing the ground; in a dozen ways they learn first that they must not measure facts by their own enthusiasm alone. Then next they discover that a great deal of Catholic Action consists in patient listening and waiting for an opportunity God will send; together with this it dawns upon them that they must be absolutely firm in their adherence to principles while listening to and mixing with people who are not so firm. After this comes the most valuable lesson of all, to accept failure or what looks like failure. At this point

they are forced back to consider the first purpose for which a man joins a conference of St Vincent de Paul, the salvation of his own soul by prayer and works of charity. In a way perhaps not very explicit or clear in the mind this links the main strands of Catholic life which need to be linked if a man is to persevere after leaving school, namely contemplation and action, principle and practice.

Obviously this scheme has its dangers. No group of young men could be let loose on Catholic families, especially lapsed ones, without careful management by the priest behind them. And when they are launched on this course of action they must never be allowed to consider themselves a kind of inner circle of saints in the school. However, this is taken very good care of by the rule of the Society; if this is observed strictly no Brother of St Vincent de Paul will ever run away with the idea that he is holy, still less a saint. All the same, one difficulty remains. Not all the members of the sixth form are going to be in the conference, and apart from the blessing its work brings on the school (and that must be a great one) it does not touch the religious instruction and formation of the main body. That matter still needs to be considered.

We frequently talk of linking up religion with the secular curriculum of a school. What does this mean? The fact that we talk of a secular curriculum betrays us. Since the Reformation we have split up our notion of truth. In fact truth is one, and though we speak of scientific, poetic, mathematical, historical truth and so on, they are all facets or 'outcrops' of Eternal Truth. Therefore, instead of talking about linking up our teaching of religion to the secular curriculum, we should do better to talk of the so-called secular curriculum opening up new views of the central reality which is God. This certainly does not suggest that we are continually harping on God and religion in everything we teach. Everyone knows that one of the arts of teaching is to talk at length on a subject without ever giving it the name our listeners do not want to hear. One remembers the salesman who talked for half an hour and sold the latest style of scrubbing brush without once mentioning the word scrubbing. In a less guileful way all subjects, if they are correctly taught, point to one thing, the truth and goodness of God.

True history sees the story of the human race with Calvary as the climax from which all other events in time draw their full

significance. Not only the story of creation and the Jewish history of the Old Testament lead up to Christ, but Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek and Roman mythology all find a term in Christ. But here we dare not teach a crude and over-simplified truth, if only because our boys are going to have these things very shrewdly questioned when they reach the university. By far the most important thing is for them to see history as the working out of God's plan for man in time, with many interruptions and obstructions put in the way by man himself and by the devil. It is essential that they should learn to see history spanning the Garden of Eden, Ur of the Chaldees, Bethlehem, Calvary, Rome and Ravenna, and not have it confined to a landing in Kent, a battle of Hastings and a Magna Carta. We shall make sure of striking a balance if we keep a distinction between absolute truths, the rights and wrongs, for instance, of Henry VIII's papal policy, and the contingencies; to try, for instance, to get inside the mind and imagine the struggles of conscience of an English Catholic in 1570 when the Catholic bishops were in exile or prison and he was compelled to make up his own mind whether he could attend his parish church or must absent himself and take the consequences. This means using the imagination and at the same time keeping in sight the principles that are at stake. Not only does this make history real but it reflects the actual moral problems that the boy already has at least become acquainted with.

In history of this sort he meets living reality, as he does too in poetry and drama which is an attempt to fix in time by means of words a truth that is fleeting, a human situation or dilemma. In poetry properly taught he not only learns *about* reality; in a sense he meets it. We all complain, of course, about soulless teaching of poetry and drama, and there is more in our complaint than a protest against boredom. We are complaining because we have not been brought to face real facts with our whole being, emotions as well as mind. Perhaps it is because we have been and really still are afraid of emotion that we render much poetry teaching a purely cerebral affair. We talk a great deal about the many sides of Henry V's character to prevent ourselves feeling and sharing the king's torment when he is torn in different directions by these various sides of himself. Perhaps we do not experience this until we hear Olivier speak:

*Upon the king! let us our lives, our souls*

*Our debts, our careful wives,  
Our children and our sins lay on the king.*

This can be brought to life in the classroom, and when it is, not only is the boy richer for having come face to face with the conflicting emotions of a king, but he will have learnt, without being taught it in so many words, that reality is subtler and richer than his analysing makes it seem; in other words, that it is greater than his mind; here are the beginnings of intellectual humility. This may not be a religious experience, but it fortifies him against the day when he will meet religious problems that will not surrender easily to his intellect with all its armament of apologetics and theology.

This business of communicating living reality touches all branches of the curriculum. Some of us are fortunate enough to have been taught by men who could make us almost feel the heat of the flames of Troy, hear the 'surge and thunder of the Odyssey', at the same time that they used all the discipline of the grammar and those figures of speech, alliteration, onomatopoeia and so on, to bring these things to life. Here we learnt from our own experience that enjoyment could be the fruit of hard disciplined work. There are men today who can present mathematics, too, as a living reality. They are rare and worth their Burnham Scale in gold. These men are fascinated by numbers like some of the early Fathers of the Church. They see mathematics not as static truth enshrined in changeless formulae, but an unfolding living pattern, and to study with them is a real adventure; it is experiment and experience for the teacher and the pupil, and the heart of this is humility. Not the humility of an empty agnosticism, but a humility that is at peace because it is based on the belief that the truth, whatever it is, the answer, whatever it is, is part of a God-made pattern and I the mathematician am put here at this point in time to play my small part in working it out. Wise mathematicians, like wise scientists, are always humble men because they are clearly conscious of the immensity of truth compared with their own ability to unravel a part of it. The good science teacher, too—and there are some—can communicate this thrill of discovery and also the joy of contemplating beauty and pattern and order.

Now no one is going to claim that these things amount to religious experience, but when a boy is introduced to them by a

man who is humble and God-fearing, who sees them (which is not necessarily the same thing as understanding them) set in the pattern of God's creation, and who has a deep sense of the mystery of reality, then this boy's religious instruction is being buttressed by all his other learning. As truly as he becomes a scientist, historian or mathematician, he also becomes a humble and God-fearing man with a strong perception of God's fingerprints on creation, and he cherishes a deep reverence for the mystery of reality and truth. This is the natural counterpart of the gifts of the Holy Ghost: wisdom that tries to look from God's point of view, knowledge and understanding that see God's hand in events, even painful ones, piety and fear of the Lord that spring from reverence and humility, and fortitude and counsel that grow out of the hard discipline and mental acuteness in the study of things. On such natural dispositions grace can build.

Certainly there is a risk in speaking this way. Great sweeps of thought and wide general statements can be fascinating and in their fascination can blind us to fallacies and loose thinking. Just as the study of poetry can be devitalized by over-emphasizing emotion and ignoring intellectual discipline, so the study of study can easily by-pass all questions of rudiments and grammar and tables and formulae. We could easily fall into the error of filling our sixth-formers' minds with resonant generalizations and not a single fact to justify them. Each subject needs to be examined carefully in detail and traced to its origin in God's plan, but the fact remains that if all our teaching has this governing idea, and to that extent at least is co-ordinated, then we can truly claim not that religion is linked up with the secular curriculum, for that we shall not believe necessary, but that every subject in the curriculum opens a view upon God's truth. If these subjects are taught not as dead letters but as living realities, then we can have some hope that a boy will leave school grounded in the idea that all knowledge is one and finds its source in God, and then because of the manner of the teaching furnished with some direct experience of reality. This will have given him the reverence that makes a man humble, and makes him think twice before he jumps to a conclusion. At least we can fairly hope that when either at the university or the technical school he meets entirely new problems, or people with a completely different way of thinking about life, he will neither lash out wildly at them for

being foolish and unlike him nor cave in completely and surrender his own principles. Instead he will bide his time and try to understand what they are saying, isolate the truth and dismiss the error.

Of course these problems are not met on intellectual grounds alone. Besides instruction we must give religious formation; but the practice of prayer and the observance of the commandments is another consideration and one which we must take for granted for the moment. At the same time we may not forget that there are no such things as intellectual grounds alone. Any intellectual training we give our children will take a moral quality from our own intellects. If our minds are humble and reverent and aware of God then so will be the knowledge we pass on, and the intellectual discipline we impart will share the same quality. Perhaps this is one of the most powerful weapons a teacher possesses. Without ever mentioning a word of God or virtue or morality he can be continually schooling his pupils in intellectual humility by a disciplined devotion to truth. Very often more than either he or the children know, habits are being formed of surrendering the mind to facts, of contemplating creatures without wishing to seize them for oneself, and of seeking for a pattern and unity in things. These things are all turning the mind and the heart towards God. Granted that faith is presupposed, and a disciplined life of prayer and virtue, then here we have a religious instruction which is at once forming and informing the mind and ultimately the whole man.



## NEWMAN'S SINGLENESS OF PURPOSE\*

C. STEPHEN DESSAIN

**M**Y dear Fathers and Brothers, we have met here to discuss the relevance of Newman to the modern age, and we have prided ourselves, not without reason, that we have come to understand him better than many in the past. We have, however, been in some danger of forgetting what the

\* A Sermon preached at the International Newman Conference, Luxembourg, July 27th, 1956, by the Superior of the Birmingham Oratory.